

Adult-ed restructuring brings encouraging results

Jefferson classes end drop-ins, see more continuity

BY NANCY C. RODRIGUEZ • NRODRIGUEZ@COURIER-JOURNAL.COM • DECEMBER 26, 2010

Adult-education instructor Kitty Head used to have something of a revolving door in her classes, with new students coming in and other students dropping out — and sometimes dropping back in — as she tried to teach the math, writing and other skills needed to pass the high school equivalency exam.

“You would always get new people, sometimes three or four in a day,” said Head, who has taught in the Jefferson County Public Schools' Adult Education Program since 1986.

Last year, however, the district changed the way it delivered adult education, moving from open enrollment, which allowed students to join ongoing classes whenever they wanted, to managed enrollment, which places students based on skill level in more structured five- to six-week classes that require regular attendance.

The change, school officials say, leads to increased student retention and builds camaraderie among students and their instructors.

“You have the same students every day, and that is awesome,” Head said. “... You can plan your lessons every day that you can build on what you did yesterday. I feel like we can move along faster.”

“It certainly helps the students when they see the same students every day, when they know what to expect, when they come to the same classroom and know how it works,” she said.

Woodrow Barlow, who dropped out of high school at 17 and has been working on earning his General Educational Development certificate, said the classes are “a lot more structured now.”

“It's more of a classroom, school-type setting,” he said. “You are in class with the same people, and everyone is on the same level.”

To enroll in adult education, residents need to be at least 16 and have officially withdrawn from high school. The program is geared toward preparing residents to pass the high school equivalency exam. Adults who have graduated from high school but have skills below the 12th-grade level also can enroll, as can those who need to improve their English skills.

The state contracts with public schools, colleges and charities in all 120 Kentucky counties to offer adult-education classes.

In 2009-10, almost 40,000 adults were enrolled in adult-education programs around the state, according to **data** from the Council on Postsecondary Education.

Kentucky plans shift

Jefferson — which has 2,656 such students — is one of 45 counties that have moved to the new, managed model, which is expected eventually to replace the open-enrollment approach.

Though it's too early to say if the change has resulted in sustainable gains, Jefferson County and state adult-education officials are cautiously optimistic.

Since moving all classes to managed enrollment during the 2009-10 school year, Jefferson County adult-education officials say overall student retention has increased by almost 13 percent.

The school district also has seen a 24 percent rise in the number of GEDs earned, from 835 in 2008-09 to 1,033.

“It is good news,” said Joyce Griffith, the district's director of adult basic education. “Managed enrollment allows us to create classes that are much more focused on what each individual student needs.”

State officials say they also are seeing student retention increasing, with data showing student-contact hours with adult-education instructors increasing to 2.8 million in 2009-10 from 2.3 million in 2008-09. Students who are more engaged are more likely to stick with the program, they say.

“We're really encouraged by the increase,” said Reecie Stagnolia, vice president for Kentucky Adult Education, a division within the state's Council on Postsecondary Education. “It's tough to engage this audience. They have so many life circumstances. ... They have a tendency to stop in and stop out.”

Wide-ranging needs

Nationally about 1 million adult students are in basic literacy and math classes, 1 million are taking English as a second language, and 300,000 are high school dropouts seeking their GEDs.

Some take classes at night while working during the day. Some are dislocated **workers**, welfare recipients or prison inmates. The federal government's 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy estimated that 30 million Americans lack basic literacy skills.
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Kentucky, spurred by its low literacy rates, began bolstering its adult-education programs a decade ago with enactment of the Kentucky Adult Education Reform Act. Since then, the number of working-age adults in the state without a high school diploma or GED has dropped from 535,804 in 2000 to 399,820 in 2009.

Still, the state has a long way to go. Nearly 1 million Kentucky residents struggle with poor reading skills, and one in five adults lacks a high school diploma, according to the council. Meeting the education needs of those adults is critical if the state is ever going to achieve its desire of having a greater proportion residents holding college degrees in order to improve its economic prospects, officials say.

The average annual income for a high school dropout in 2005 was \$17,299, compared to \$26,933 for a high school graduate, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The average income for a person with a four-year college degree was \$52,671.

It is a reality that Tangelita Jackson, 28, knows all too well. A high school dropout, Jackson has spent the past six years working for a fast-food chain, earning \$8 an hour.

“I do not want to work any more dead-end jobs,” said Jackson, who spends her days at Ahrens Learning Center in downtown Louisville, one of more than 50 locations where the school district offers free adult classes.

Jackson hopes to take her GED exam soon and enroll in Sullivan University to learn to become a chef.

Changes beyond classroom

The managed-enrollment model goes beyond just getting adults to pass the GED test. It includes enhanced orientation and advising, in which counselors work with students to set goals and work on problem solving and critical thinking before they even start classes.

“They need to be empowered, not enabled,” Griffith said.

That empowerment includes talking to students about employment realities — such as noting that the majority of jobs require some form of postsecondary education — and helping them explore educational opportunities beyond the GED.

Twenty-three percent of 2008 GED recipients in Kentucky enrolled in college within two years of passing the test, according to state data; state officials would like to see that percentage increase.

“That’s something we’re really focused on,” Stagnolia said. “The GED is simply not enough. It doesn’t prepare you to be successful in college or the work force.”

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